

Joy Lee

Brief Q&A

SAMUEL CLEMENS

Like many Asian-American actresses who appeared onscreen in the 1950s, Joy Lee didn't get a role worthy of her talents. Born in Oregon to Lee and Flora Quan (who were immigrants from China), as a child she studied dance and became an accomplished ballerina with the Monica Lind ballet company. In 1949, in Oregon, she was in stage productions of *Green Moon* and *Slaughter on 10th Avenue*. About the latter, an unnamed critic for the Medford Mail Tribune wrote, "Second favorite with the audience was the petite Chinese ballerina, Joy Lee, who dances with much grace and charm."

Later, in Hollywood, Joy was in *Son of Sinbad* (1955), *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing* (1955), and *Emergency Hospital* (1956), as well as television episodes of such series as *Sergeant Preston of the Yukon*, *Crossroads*, and *The Man Called X*. She is known to filmgoers as the wife of Pierre Jalbert, the actor and skier known for playing the recurring role of "Caje" Lemay on the TV show *Combat!* They married on January 16, 1961, and enjoyed 53 years together until his death on January 22, 2014.

Samuel Clemens: How did you get your start in Hollywood?

Joy Lee: I was raised on a ranch in Oregon. My parents were hops farmers. I had several brothers. My mother thought that it'd be good if I learned ballet. I studied with Monica Lind, who cast me in recitals. When I was in my 20s, I got a telephone call from a well-known actor who did a lot of rugged characters. He saw a photograph of me in a pamphlet. We had lunch and he proceeded to ask me if I wanted to be an actress. I said no, and he sat there surprised. I think that he was accustomed to women who had more theatrical ambition. I ended up staying in the area and taught dance while doing some acting on

the side.

SC: How were you cast in *Son of Sinbad*?

Joy Lee: I had just signed with an agency, and I was told that some ethnic women were needed for an Arabian Nights film. I wasn't given any information about the film we were doing. I didn't even see it until recently.

SC: Can you tell us about your role in *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing*?

Joy Lee: Initially, I was cast as a stewardess who does announcements on the intercom. It was cut from the film, but you can still hear my voice. I guess they didn't think it was an important enough part.

SC: You appeared in a 1956 episode of *Crossroads* titled "Calvary in China" with James Hong, who recently won a Screen Actors Guild Award [Outstanding Performance by a Cast in a Motion Picture for *Everything Everywhere All at Once*]. What was he like?

Joy Lee: We always thought he was gay because he never dated. I read that he eventually got married, so I guess we were wrong.

SC: You were married to Pierre Jalbert, the actor and skier, for decades. How did you two meet?

Joy Lee: I don't remember how we met, but I do remember that he took me to Aspen and proposed to me. It was totally unexpected. We were wed that week. Since I no longer needed to dance to support myself, I did other things. I later took some classes and became a freelance designer. After my husband retired, we traveled the world.

SC: There's a rumor that you got his acting career started. Is that true? How do you feel about his legacy?

Joy Lee: It was by complete accident. I had gotten in an auto accident, and my agent stopped by to see how I was doing. He started telling my husband that Paramount Pictures was holding auditions for *Combat!* That's how he



In the *Sergeant Preston of the Yukon* episode "Pack Ice Justice" (1956), Joy Lee played a girl named Eewa.



Joy Lee (left) with Margaret Lindsay

became a star. That was long ago, though. I'd be surprised if anyone knows who he is today. My gardener stopped by recently and saw the photographs of him around the house, and he asked who he was. Anyone who would've seen these

photographs in the 1960s would know him right away.

SC: What was the greatest challenge for you in Hollywood?

Joy Lee: I was grateful for any role I got, considering I was Asian-American. There weren't a lot of

parts available, and the parts I got weren't appealing nor glamorous. I was an "Eskimo." I was a slave. I was a nurse. I didn't relate to the characters. I didn't like the idea of pretending to be other people, either.